DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 215 460 EC 142 119

TITLE Selecting Toys and Gifts for Severely Mentally and Physically Handicapped People.
INSTITUTION Georgia Learning Resources System/Child Serve, Scottdale.
PUB DATE Dec 81
NOTE 25p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Secondary Education; *Equipment; Games; *Instructional Materials; *Severe Disabilities; *Toys

ABSTRACT

Suggestions are given regarding selection of gifts and toys for severely handicapped persons. General principles (such as safety and durability) are followed by specific suggestions about clothes, food, toys (including musical instruments and balls), books and records, and various types of equipment (such as blenders for food preparation, tape recorders, rockers, swings, and hammocks). (CL)

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SELECTING TOYS AND GIFTS FOR SEVERELY MENTALLY AND PHYSICALLY HANDICAPPED PEOPLE

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EC 142 119

Introduction

Selecting appropriate presents for a severely mentally and physically handicapped person can be a challenging undertaking. Of course every handicapped individual is unique in terms of interests, personality and skills--as is every non-handicapped individual. However, during the past 27 years my family has found some very successful types of gifts which have pleased my severely handicapped youngest sister, Becky. (We have also found and bought many failures during those same years!) Hopefully, some of these suggestions will be of help to you in choosing gifts for your severely mentally and physically handicapped friend or family member.

Betsy Primm
Child Serve Coordinator
Metro East GLRS
December 1981

I. GENERAL PRINCIPLES

A. Try to find out if the person has any particular interest. Many severely mentally and physically handicapped people love music or stuffed animals or picture books. Often the person's parent or teacher can furnish you with this information.

B. Select toys which are durable. A good toy should be able to withstand being dropped, hammered on and occasionally stepped on without falling apart. Toys made of good quality foam rubber, heavy duty plastic, wood or metal usually prove more economical in the long run because they last.

C. Select items that are safe. Look out for items with sharp edges or points which could cut or poke the person. Watch out for wooden items which have not been sanded smooth or which could cause splinters to become lodged in the person's finger or hand. Check to see if stuffed items are filled with such material as small beads or pellets which could be dangerous if inhaled or swallowed. Also check to see if the paint or dye used to decorate the items is non-toxic since some severely mentally and physically handicapped children tend to put things in their mouths.

D. Select items which tend to require a minimum of manipulation on the person's part to produce the maximum performance of the item. Often pushing one

button or pulling one switch will start a music box, a radio or a series of gyrations by a mechanical toy. These types of items are more appropriate for the severely mentally and physically handicapped person because they minimize the effort that must be expended by the individual to produce the desired action of the item. If the item requires manipulations on the operator's part that are too difficult or that involve too many steps, it will not be enjoyed by the recipient.

E. Select items which the individual can use alone if possible. If the item can be adapted so that the person receiving it can use it with minimal help or with no help at all, it is more likely to get much greater use. To the degree that the gift requires outside participation or help from others to be operated, its likelihood of being used diminishes.

F. Select clothes and items that are washable. Clothes, toys and items which aren't hand or machine washable are impractical gifts for severely mentally and physically handicapped people. If it can't be washed or wiped clean, don't buy it.

G. Select items which have a limited number of parts. Toys and games which have numerous pieces are usually not a good selection to buy for the severely mentally and physically handicapped individual. Often they are too difficult for the person to operate or

manipulate. They also tend to get scattered, lost and easily broken. The pieces can also be dangerous if they are small enough to be swallowed or to get lodged in a person's ear canal.

II. SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS*

A. Clothes

Often parents don't think of buying stylish clothes or accessories for a severely mentally and physically handicapped child. This is unfortunate. Attractive and stylish clothes often help to accentuate the handicapped person's good features and frequently result in compliments from others. The positive attention which the handicapped person receives from others as a result of wearing an attractive outfit, an "in" alligator shirt or a pair of Nike tennis shoes makes the gift of such items a double success.

When selecting clothing, it is often wise to try to get items which minimize physical defects and are easy to get on and off. For example, overblouses and pullover shirts may minimize a spinal curvature and reduce or eliminate buttons. On the other hand, sweaters and shirts may need to button or zip up the front rather than be of the pullover type if arm control or range of motion is a problem. Shoes may be easier to manage if they don't have laces. Slacks, shorts, jeans and skirts are often much more serviceable if they have elastic waistbands. Many attractive

*For the reader's convenience, the full addresses of all stores mentioned here will be listed at the back of the booklet.

items of clothing can be easily adapted to make them more functional by substituting velcro fasteners for snaps, buckles and buttons. Replacing regular shoe laces with elastic ones eliminates the need for unlacing or retying shoes every time they are put on or removed. Functional modifications like these also often increase the comfort of the clothes for the wearer as well as save family members time and trouble.

B. Food

One of the greatest enjoyments of many severely mentally and physically handicapped people is good food. Of course, it is important to check with the parent to find out if there are any foods to which the person is allergic and to see if the person has trouble chewing or swallowing. This information will guide you toward (or away from) certain types of foods.

Soft types of food are usually best for a person who has trouble chewing or swallowing. Fudge (without nuts), ice cream, Junket, Jello, puddings, cheese spreads, custards, homemade apple sauce and congealed salads (without crunchy ingredients) are all relatively easy to swallow and require no chewing. Foodstuffs like Jello, custard, and apple sauce are often easier for the severely mentally and physically handicapped person to control and swallow than are pure liquids like soup or milkshakes or juices.

C. Toys

In selecting toys for severely mentally and physically handicapped individuals, it is very important to determine two factors before beginning to shop:

1. Are there any attributes that the person you are shopping for seems to like or dislike in a toy? For instance, does the person like or dislike:
   - musical toys,
   - toys that light up,
   - toys that make noise,
   - certain textures or materials such as plastic, rubber, wood, or foam?
2. What are the handicapped person's physical abilities? Can the individual best use his or her hands or feet and in what ways? Specifically, can the person:
   - pull a string on a talking doll,
   - turn a dial on a wind-up item,
   - hold a stick to hit a drum or xylophone,
   - use a finger or fingers to push a button or a piano key,
   - use legs and feet to pump a rocking chair or swing,
   - throw, roll or kick a ball,
   - step on a foot pedal or lever to activate a toy?

Knowing something of the person's physical abilities and individual interests can make a tremendous difference in determining the success of your purchase.

The toys which have been the biggest successes in our household over the years are as follows:

Balls, particularly ones which are large and light (e.g., beachballs) and are easy to roll back and forth, have been good choices. They respond easily to being pushed or kicked. Nerf balls of the soft-ball and basketball variety have also proved fun and easy to grip due to their texture and their light weight.

Musical instruments which make music when hit have been successful purchases. Drums, sturdy xylophones such as those made by Rhythm Band, Inc. (available at ABC School Supply for $10.50), toy pianos and and toy electronic organs have all gotten much use. In selecting such items, try to find ones which have a broad base and won't tip over easily if accidentally hit.

Two musical items which are currently popular are the Magical Musical Thing (available at Richway Stores for $16.99) and the VL Tone Portable Electrical Organ by Cassio (available at K-Mart for $54.00). The Magical Musical Thing is a thermometer-shaped instrument which uses a 9-volt battery and responds to light touch by producing a wide variety of different musical notes. Its advantage is that it requires very

little pressure to be activated and can be played with knuckles, toes or by being pressed against an elbow, knee or hip as well as with one's fingers. It is durable but lightweight and may need to be stabilized on a table or strapped in front of the person between the arms of a wheelchair or armchair to provide the handicapped person access to its playing surface.

Another musical instrument of slightly more sophistication is the PortaSound by Yamaha. The PortaSound is a miniature keyboard organ that comes in three models of increasing complexity. The keys are easily depressed but the instrument will require a flat surface for stabilizing. An interesting feature of the instrument is the automatic rhythm section that produces five different rhythmic beats. The organ may be operated by batteries or an AC adaptor and comes in a portable, lightweight carrying case (available at DeKalb Musicians for $150 to $250).

Music box items have frequently been happily received gifts. One type which has proved easy for my sister to operate because it requires minimal finger strength or dexterity is Dial-a-Song by Walt Disney Productions (available at Rich's for $6.99). This music box can be activated either by turning a center knob or by dialing a phone dial. The toy is in the shape of a modern telephone and can stand upright or lie flat

on a table. Dial-a-Song music boxes can be purchased which play either "When You Wish Upon a Star" or "Chim Chim Cheree." Another music box item which is currently available is called Select-o-Tune by Tiger, Inc. (available at the Electronics Boutique, Lenox Square, for $16.95). It is a plastic toy which is in the shape of a jukebox and has 12 different buttons, each of which activates the playing of a different song when depressed. It requires no winding and is operated by a 9-volt battery. The buttons are easy to depress. The biggest disadvantage to this item is that it is very light in weight and may need to be stabilized on a table or playing surface to prevent its being tipped or knocked over accidentally.

A music box which would be an appropriate gift for either a child or an adult is one which is called the Magic Dancer (available at the Shop of S. Rogers for $21.50). It features a hinged dancing court jester clown that is held together by tiny marionette strings. The jester begins to dance in an ever-changing pattern when the drawer at the base of the music box is pulled open. The opening of the drawer also activates the music. Both the dancer and the music stop when the drawer is closed. The attributes of this music box are the ease with which the drawer

can be opened and closed and the fact that it does not look like a child's toy. However, it is lightweight and would probably need to be stabilized in some manner to enable the handicapped person to open and close the drawer without tipping over the whole music box.

Stuffed animals and stuffed dolls have also enjoyed varying degrees of popularity. The ones which are made of soft materials have been more successful than those with rubber or plastic limbs or faces. Many of the most successful stuffed toys have had added features such as their making a sound when squeezed or talking when a ring attached to them is pulled. In selecting dolls or animals with pull rings which make them talk, check to see whether the ring is difficult to pull and whether it is very long. The talking toys with relatively short strings which are easy to pull tend to be the best bets.

Two stuffed animals which are currently popular sellers are the Talking Happy Bear (available at Richway Stores for $23.99) and Just-Huggit (available at Saks for $25.00). The Talking Happy Bear uses one battery and talks or laughs when it is shaken or bounced up and down. Just-Huggit is also a small stuffed bear that uses a battery and purrs and vibrates when it is hugged. Both these items are

well-constructed and require a very small amount of physical manipulation, strength or coordination to activate their mechanical features.

D. Books and Records

Many severely mentally and physically handicapped individuals love to be read to. The variety of books and stories available is limitless. Usually it is advisable to select books with good, clear, large pictures and which are short or are composed of many short stories. When possible, try to select books which are printed on fairly heavy paper stock. They are more durable and it is more difficult for a person to tear or bend them accidentally while turning their pages.

If the handicapped person has a tape recorder, it is a good idea to record aloud the story or book that is being given to them. This recording will enable them to hear you reading the story again and again and thereby provides the person lasting enjoyment.

Records are another source of tremendous enjoyment to many severely mentally and physically handicapped people. As is the case with books, the variety of records available is tremendous. In choosing musical records it is very helpful to know if the handicapped person has any likes or dislikes in the musical line. It is not unusual to find severely mentally and

physically handicapped individuals who like certain types of music and who dislike or show no interest in other types. For instance, Pearl Buck wrote that her severely mentally handicapped daughter would burst into tears whenever she heard religious music. My own sister loves Mr. Rogers albums, the soundtracks from "Annie" and "The Sound of Music," and recordings of the Morman Tabernacle Choir, but she dislikes country and western music or purely instrumental records. Do endeavor to get advice on the person's musical likes and dislikes in advance of making any record purchases.

Certain record departments or stores specialize in musical and story records for children. For instance, the Educational Record Center on Maple Drive has a large supply of children's records and will provide helpful guidance to you regarding the types of records available for children. This company will allow a customer to listen to any of its records and will allow a purchaser to return or exchange any record that proves to be an unsuccessful gift.

The Library for the Blind provides a vast variety of books and stories which have been put on records or casette tapes and which can be borrowed free by any handicapped person who is unable to read print. This agency also lends handicapped individuals equipment as well as tape cassettes and records so as to maximize their ability to utilize the library's resources.

E. Equipment

Sometimes a piece of equipment or hardware can be one of the most useful and pleasurable gifts a person can give to a severely mentally and physically handicapped individual. The items in this category which my family has found to be of lasting value to and for my sister include the following:

1. Blender. Like a large number of other severely mentally and physically handicapped individuals, my sister is unable to chew her food. Therefore, the types of food available for her to eat were limited. However, with the use of a food blender, she is now virtually able to eat anything from a submarine sandwich to a lobster or green salad or a chocolate eclair! Though their texture is different, the variety and flavor of all these delicious foods are now possible for her to enjoy. Blended food is also helpful for individuals who have difficulty swallowing because it can be easily thinned or thickened to an optimum consistency for the individual to control without gagging or choking. A blender can be a wonderful gift because it not only expands the limits of the severely handicapped person's choice of foods but it also can make the job of feeding the person a simpler and more pleasant experience for other family members.

2. Record Player. My sister's record player and records are a great source of pleasure to her and to many of her classmates. In selecting a record player, get one which will stack several records at one time rather than one which only holds one record at a time. It is also a good idea to get a record player which will automatically cut itself off after the last record has been played.

   The Library for the Blind will lend a record player to any handicapped individual who cannot read print or hold a book. Information about borrowing record players from this agency can be obtained by contacting the Library staff.

3. Tape Recorder. This piece of equipment has provided my sister greater enjoyment than any other item she has. With it we are able to record different family members' reading aloud to her, TV musical specials and songs played on the radio. Of course, it can also be used to listen to commercial tapes as well as homemade ones.

   It is probably wiser to buy a cassette tape recorder instead of a reel-to-reel recorder because they are lighter in weight, smaller, and easier to transport. Many commercial tapes are available for purchase in cassette form and a large variety of cassette tapes may be borrowed from the Library for the Blind.

A feature which is very advantageous to have on a tape recorder is an extension speaker outlet for earphones. This feature allows the severely mentally and physically handicapped individual to listen to the tape recorder without the tape's being heard by other individuals. Cassette tape recorders of this type can be purchased from any large department store. Their cost ranges from $40.00 to $75.00.

The Library for the Blind loans cassette tape players to handicapped individuals who are unable to read print. Write or call the agency to obtain more information about this service.

Martel Electronics produces a portable two-speed cassette recorder which enables an individual to record up to six hours of information on one standard cassette tape. These tape recorders are good quality and have the advantage of their tape's not having to be switched very often. This also cuts down on the problem of storing numerous cassettes. The disadvantages of these machines are that they are expensive (ranging from $90.00 to $200.00) and they require high quality tapes to be used when the machine is recording on its slower speed.

5. Earphones and Pillow Speaker. Many tape recorders, radios and TVs come with a receptacle into which headphones or a pillow speaker may be plugged. This feature enables the handicapped person to remain in a family room area with other family members while simultaneously listening to music, the television, or tape recordings. A pillow speaker with a miniature phone jack and volume control can be obtained from Radio Shack for $4.99. Lightweight, adjustable mini-headphones which are not cumbersome are obtainable from Oodles Electronic World. These headphones have foam ear coverings, each of which is only about the size of a fifty-cent piece. They come in non-stereo and stereo editions and sell for $9.95 and $36.00, respectively. This store also sells very slim pocket radios and other audio-visual equipment with which these headphones may be used. The headphones are equipped with a miniature phone jack which plugs into any radio, TV, or tape recorder that has a jack receptacle. Pillow speakers and certain types of headphones can also be borrowed by a handicapped individual from the Library for the Blind without charge.
6. Rockers, Swings and Hammocks. A rocking chair can be a wonderful gift for a person with limited mobility or coordination and often provides the person with many hours of recreation. In selecting

a rocking chair, try to obtain one with padded arms and one which is difficult to tip over. Height is an important factor because if the person's feet don't touch the floor, it will be very difficult for him or her to make the rocking chair rock.

In the spring and summer months a porch swing or outdoor bench-type swing can be a great source of enjoyment. It is not unusual for many severely mentally and physically handicapped individuals to greatly enjoy rocking--sometimes in an inappropriate manner in that they rock their bodies back and forth while sitting on stationary furniture. Swings and rocking chairs provide socially acceptable ways for them to engage in appropriate rocking activities.

A hammock is another item which can provide a tremendous source of pleasure to many severely handicapped individuals. The best type of hammock we have found is the Pawley's Island rope hammock. This type of hammock allows the person to see through the ropes, is very comfortable to lie in, is cooler than a solid cloth hammock and tends to be much less likely to tip over. Also, the ropes give the person in the hammock good handholds and this feature increases the person's sense of

security. Many models of this type of hammock are sold in department stores in the Atlanta area during the spring and summer. They come with either polyester or cotton roping. The cotton ropes tend to be more comfortable whereas the polyester ropes are more durable. These hammocks can easily be adapted for severely physically impaired people by placing a cushion or small mattress inside them. The Pawley's Island Hammock Company makes and sells both polyester and cotton hammocks on a year-round basis. Prices range from $70.00 to $92.00, depending on size and type of rope requested.

F. Other

Many highly successful gifts for severely mentally and physically handicapped individuals can cost the giver little or no money. For instance, a bird feeder which can be hung near a window which is accessible to the handicapped individual or two goldfish in a bowl can provide fascination for countless hours to individuals with limited mobility.

A trip to the barber shop or beauty parlor can be a good gift and a great adventure for a severely mentally and physically handicapped person. There are a number of barbers and beauticians who are willing to serve handicapped persons, especially if the handicapped person can be scheduled at relatively slow times.

(An effective way to obtain the names of barbers and beauticians who will work with handicapped patrons is to call the nursing homes in your area and ask them who attends to their residents' hair.) The resulting attractive haircut or hair style tends to elicit favorable comments from others and helps improve the person's physical appearance.

If the handicapped person has a tape recorder, then a nice gift to give is a tape of your reading aloud stories or poems or your singing or playing a musical instrument. Ask the handicapped person's family members for suggestions regarding the types of stories, poems, rhymes, songs or music that he or she enjoys. The monetary cost of such a gift is small but the pleasure it can give is tremendous.

Offering to stay with a severely handicapped person for an evening while the rest of the family goes out can be a gift that brings pleasure to the handicapped person and is much appreciated by the entire family. It is often difficult and very expensive for a family to get a sitter to stay with a handicapped family member and parents frequently feel uneasy about leaving the handicapped individual with someone who is a stranger. A gift of offering to care for the handicapped person for a few hours one evening may provide diversion to the handicapped individual and also be of great help to the person's family.

Small outings such as taking the handicapped person for a ride, or to feed the ducks at a park or to go swimming can be tremendous delights to many severely mentally and physically handicapped individuals. The Parks and Recreation Department for the city or county can provide callers with information about swimming pools and other facilities that have special programs and activities for handicapped people. The gift of offering to transport a handicapped person to and from a program or community activity provided for handicapped individuals may be a real service to the person's family and may be the factor that enables the handicapped person to participate in the event or activity.

Remember, the greatest gifts you can give any person, handicapped or not, are the gifts of your time, your attention, and your love. In the final analysis, these gifts will invariably be the most appropriate, meaningful and successful ones of all. Of that I am sure because they are the gifts that my sister Becky has so richly given to everyone in our family all her life. Our purchases for her hit and miss. Her gifts to us never fail.

Reference

Kaban, Barbara. Choosing Toys for Children. Schocken Book Company, New York, 1979.

The items suggested in this booklet may be available at many other stores and for cheaper prices. The only criterion which was used to determine which specific stores were mentioned was that the items were known to be available at them in December 1981. With that criterion in mind, the following addresses and phone numbers are provided as a convenience to potential shoppers.

A B C School Supply
6500 Peachtree Industrial Blvd.
Norcross, Georgia 30071
447-5000

DeKalb Musicians
115 Clairmont Road
Decatur, Georgia 30030
378-3109

Educational Record Center
Suite 124
3120 Maple Drive NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30305
233-5935

The Electronics Boutique
Lenox Square Store #44
Lenox and Peachtree Roads
Atlanta, Georgia 30326
261-9890

K-Mart
Store #4210
2581 Piedmont Road NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30324
261-6900

Library for the Blind
1050 Murphy Avenue SW
Atlanta, Georgia 30310
656-2465

Oodles Electronic World
Lenox Square
Lenox and Peachtree Roads
Atlanta, Georgia 30326
233-9766

Pawley's Island Hammock Company
Post Office Box 308
Pawley's Island, SC 29585
803/237-4291

Radio Shack
Broadview Plaza
2581 Piedmont Road NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30324
266-0748

Rich's Department Store
Lenox Square
Lenox & Peachtree Roads
Atlanta, Georgia 30326
231-2820

Richway
Store #5
2400 North Druid Hills Road
Atlanta, Georgia 30329
325-3211

Saks Fifth Avenue
Phipps Plaza
3440 Peachtree Road NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30326

The Shop of S. Rogers
2351 Peachtree Road NE
Atlanta, Georgia 30309
233-2654

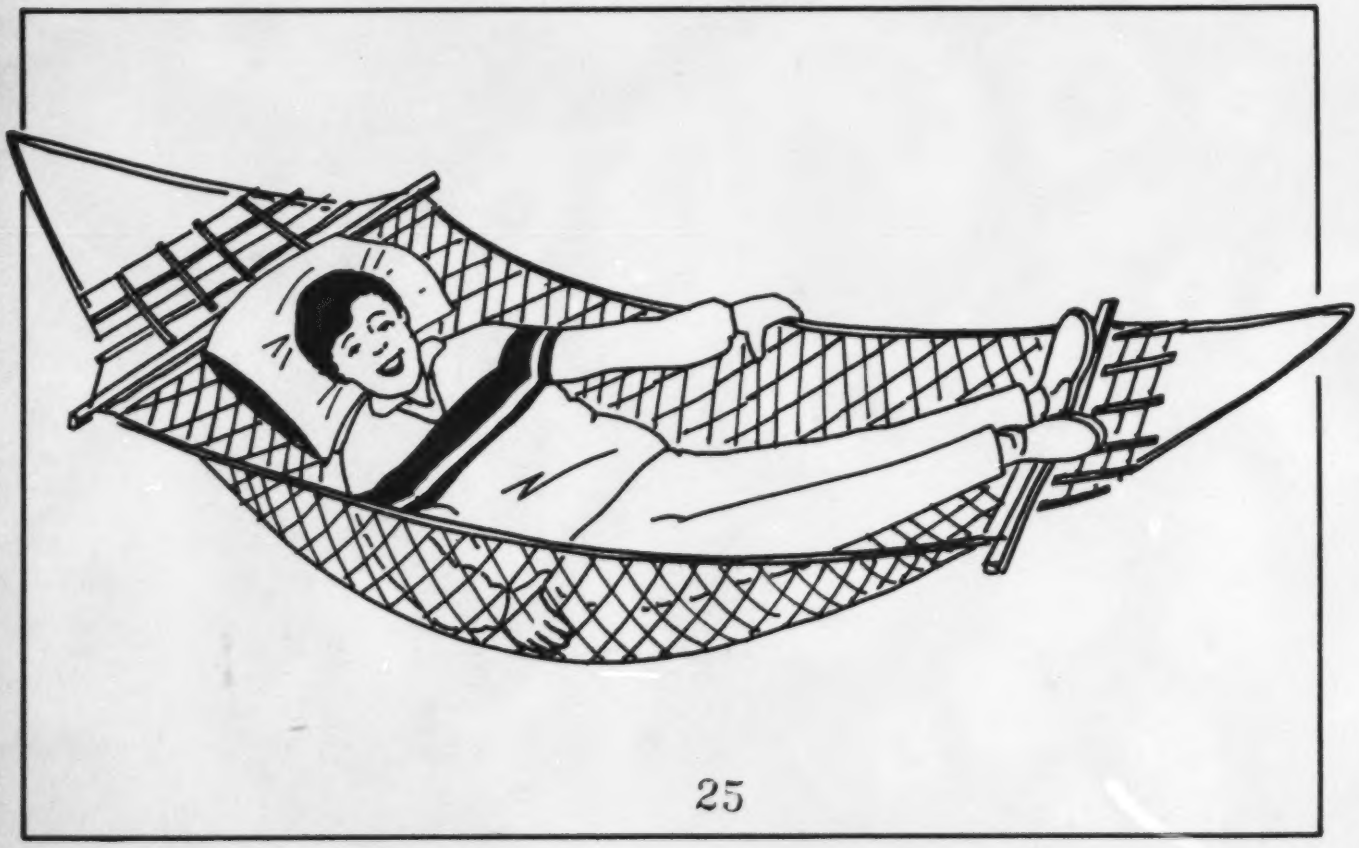
THE MAGICAL MUSICAL THING

DIAL-A-TUNE MUSIC BOX

PUSH BUTTON MUSIC BOX

MAGIC DANCER MUSIC BOX

PILLOW SPEAKER WITH VOLUME CONTROL



PAWLEY'S ISLAND ROPE HAMMOCK